

St Matthew's Churchyard Lightcliffe

September wildlife snapshot



Early morning mist rises from the churchyard, seen through a spider's web.

Bird/animal behaviour

Although this looks to be a peaceful scene, the churchyard was far from quiet as I walked in early one September morning. Harsh, rasping calls coming from one of the oak trees, gave away a group of **jays**. A local dog walker had reported seeing four jays fighting earlier in the week, two of which fell out of a tree in front of him, giving him a very good view! The jays I saw, chased each other from tree to tree and I got a few "nearly photos", clicking my shutter a split second after they had flown from a branch or gravestone, so this is someone else's photo:



These exotic looking birds are quite shy of humans and often, all you see is the tell-tale white rump as they fly away into a tree. Jays have a streaked crest which they can raise when agitated or when displaying to a mate. Their Latin name reflects their behaviour: *Garrulus* meaning chatty/noisy and *glandarius* meaning "of acorns", referring to their favourite food source. They are one of a number of birds that cache food for later in the year when acorns or other food sources are scarce. A single jay can bury several thousand acorns each year. Like other corvids, they are highly intelligent birds and will remember where they have hidden the nuts. Of course, the ones they forget about germinate into new oak saplings.

The **grey squirrels** also seem to be very vocal at the moment. For anyone who hasn't ever heard the repertoire of a squirrel, there is a link here: <https://sounds.bl.uk/environment/british-wildlife-recordings/022m-w1cdr0001426-0400v0>

I spent some time observing them busily collecting acorns and beech mast then furiously digging holes to bury them for later sustenance. Standing underneath an oak tree one afternoon, I was showered with twigs and leaves as the squirrels leapt acrobatically from branch to branch in search of food.

Wood pigeons are also enjoying the beech mast which is in plentiful supply this year.



Photo: Grey Squirrel (by G. Bradley) www.uksafari.com



Wood pigeon eating fallen beech mast.



In Britain, we have two species of native oak, sessile (*Quercus petraea*) and pedunculate (*Quercus robur*). I think the trees in our churchyard are **sessile oaks**. Sessile means “unstaked” and refers to the acorns which grow directly from the twig – see my photo. Acorns from a pedunculate oak grow on stalks. Confusingly, the leaves of a sessile oak are stalked whereas those of a pedunculate oak are unstaked!

At the other end of the day, I visited the churchyard one evening at dusk when the wind had dropped. In the stillness, as the light faded, I watched the silhouettes of **pipistrelle bats** foraging for insects against a pale lemon sky. A cat sat motionless on the west wall, no doubt hoping for a mouse, whilst a late **robin** sang a muted song from within a nearby hawthorn tree.



Pipistrelle bat in flight by Hugh Clark Bat conservation Trust



I know photos of slugs won't be everyone's cup of tea, but I couldn't resist this handsome creature. I found it on wet grass in the churchyard after some overnight rain. It's a **leopard slug**, named for its striking markings. Gardeners will be pleased to know that these slugs are harmless as they eat dead and rotting plants rather than juicy living ones. Slugs have four tentacles (which they can move independently) – two for touching and tasting and two for seeing and smelling.

Plants/Trees



The **hawthorns** are looking splendid at the moment, covered in red berries. Later in the winter, these will provide much needed food for a variety of bird species such as blackbirds, finches, robins and thrushes. Mistle thrushes fiercely defend berry-laden trees in their territories against any "in-comers"!

The **wild carrot** flowers mentioned in last month's snapshot are now turning to seed. The fruiting head of the plant closes up and when brown, resembles a bird's nest – in Somerset, a common name for the plant is "Bird's nest". Each fruit is covered in spines and designed to stick onto a passing animal's fur to disperse it away from the parent plant.





Other plants flowering at the moment include **Cat's ear**, whose yellow flowers brighten the churchyard and bright white **yarrow**, shown here with the **ox-eye daisies** which have flowered all summer. Yarrow is another umbellifer, like the hogweed and cow parsley, providing flat landing pads for pollinating insects. It has distinctive narrow, feathery leaves – its species name *millefolium* means “thousand leaf”. It has long been used to heal wounds and in Ireland was believed to increase one's physical attractiveness!



The trees are watching us! This bark pattern reminded me of an elephant's eye.

A couple of visitors to the churchyard on our Heritage Open Day said they had seen a pair of barn owls flying nearby, which was exciting news. Do let me know if you spot them too.



Marjorie Middleton September 2019